Washington

Irving

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Washington Irving: His Life and Work.

Where Irving was Baptized.

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Washington Irving: His Life and Work.

ASHINGTON IRVING was born in the city of New York on April 3, 1783, the year in which the American colonies finally achieved the independence which they had promised for themselves in the Declaration seven years earlier. I remember, when visiting Sunnyside with my father a few years before Irving's death, hearing him narrate (doubtless not for the first time), how his nurse had held him up in her arms while General Washington was passing by on horseback, in order that the General might put his hand on the head of the youngster who bore his name. Irving was at this time five years old. I looked with reverential awe at the head that had been touched by the first President of the country. It is probable, however, that I did not see the actual spot that had been thus consecrated, for in the latter years

Gen. Rec. Christy 23 Jan 46 Sekwards

of his life Irving wore the wig that is depicted in Martin's crayon sketch,—the portrait by which he is best known.

After a common-school training, Irving was admitted to the bar in 1806, having previously served as a clerk, first with Brockholst Livingston, and later with Ogden Hoffman. The law never appears, however, to have exercised for him any fascination, and his practice at the bar was probably not important. He was, however, associated as a junior among the counsel who undertook the defence of Aaron Burr in the famous trial held in Richmond in June, 1807. The letters written by him from Richmond at this time show graceful powers of description and a keen sense of humour. He was frank enough to say, in chronicling the final acquittal of Burr, that the result could hardly be said to be due to any noteworthy efforts on the part of the particular junior counsel who described the case.

The first literary undertaking to which his pen was devoted (apart from a few ephemeral sketches for one of the weekly papers) was a serial publication issued at irregular intervals under the title of *Salmagundi*. In this work he had the collaboration of his brother William and of James K. Paulding. The *Salmagundi Papers*, afterwards collected in

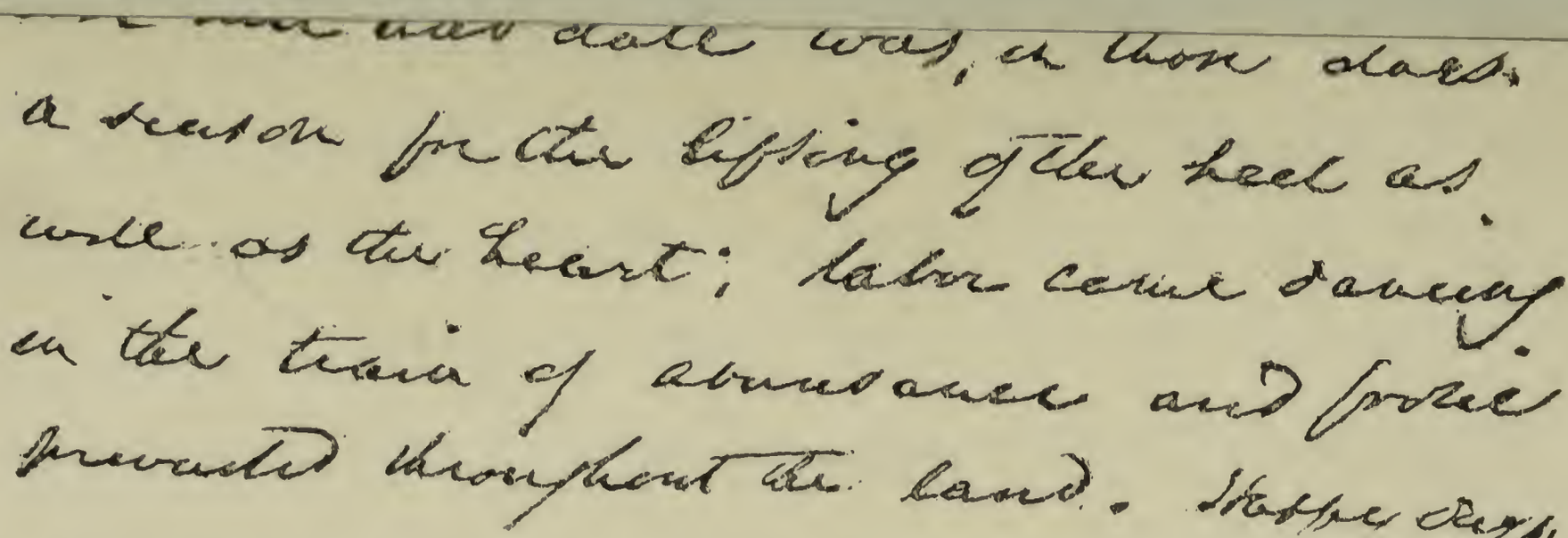
The Edict of William the Testy.

book form, possess, in addition to their interest as humorous literature, historic value as pictures of social life in New York during the first decade of the nineteenth century.

The famous *History of New York by Died-*

"Conducted every stray hog or cow in triumph to the pound."

rich Knickerbocker was published in 1809. The mystery concerning the disappearance of old Dr. Knickerbocker, to whom the authorship of the work was assigned, was preserved for a number of months. The first advertisement of the book stated that the MS. had been found by the landlord of a well-known inn

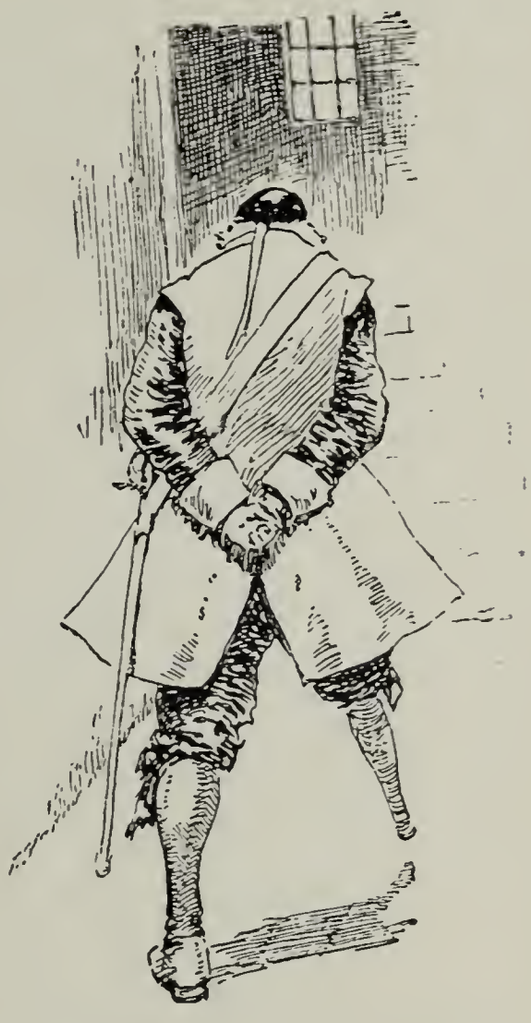


FACSIMILE OF MANUSCRIPT OF IRVING'S "KNICKERBOCKER NEW YORK."

of those "indignation meetings" set on foot in the time of William the Testy, where men met together to mail at public abuses, groan over the evils of the times and make each other miserable; there were joyous gatherings of the two sexes to dance and make merry. Now were instituted "quilting bees" and "husking bees" and other rural assemblages where, under the inspiring influence of the fiddle toil was lightened by gaiety and followed up by the dance. "raising bees" also were frequent, where houses sprang up at the wagging of the fiddle stick, at the walls of Thebes sprang up of Jove to the sound of the lyre of Amphion. Jolly autumn, which pours its treasures over hill and dale was, in those days, a season for the lifting of the heel as well as the heart; labor came dancing in the train of abundance and frolic prevailed throughout the land. Hoppe days!

FACSIMILE OF MANUSCRIPT OF IRVING'S "KNICKERBOCKER NEW YORK."

among the effects of his departed lodger, and had been sold to the printer in order to offset the lodger's indebtedness. When Irving was finally announced as the author, it was difficult for his fellow New-Yorkers to believe that this unsuccessful young lawyer (he was then in his twenty-sixth year) could have produced a work which gave evidence of such maturity of literary power.



"And stumping up and down stairs."

Irving had occupied an excellent position in New York society, a society which in the earlier years of the century was still largely made up of the old Dutch families. In the *Veracious Chronicle* of Dr. Knickerbocker free use had been made of the names of these historic families, and it is related that many of the young author's Dutch friends found it difficult to accord forgiveness for the liberty that had been taken in making their noble ancestors the heroes of such a travesty of history and of such rollicking episodes.

After a brief editorial experience in charge of a magazine entitled *The Analectic*, which

Washington Irving.
(From the drawing made by Vanderlyn in Paris, 1805.)

never achieved a very robust existence, Irving enjoyed for a few months the excitement of

military service, having been appointed a colonel on the staff of Governor Tompkins.

Matilda Hoffman.

During the campaign of 1813 he was charged with some responsibility in connection with the defence of the northern line of the State,

but he does not appear ever to have come under fire.

During Irving's brief law association with Mr. Hoffman, he became intimate in the Hoffman family circle, and this intimacy was kept up after the law office was forsaken. It was Josiah Hoffman's daughter Matilda who formed the heroine in the only romance in Irving's life. He became engaged to her when he was barely of age, but the engagement lasted but for a few months, Matilda Hoffman dying suddenly at the age of nineteen. At the time of Irving's death it was found that he was still wearing in a locket her miniature and a lock of hair that had been given to him more than half a century before.

In 1810, Irving was taken into partnership by his two brothers, who were carrying on business as general merchants and importers, and whose operations were attended by all the fluctuations and risks which were inseparable from business undertakings during the years of the embargo and of the war. On the declaration of peace, when there seemed to be some prospect for an improvement of trade with England, Irving was sent by his firm to be its representative in London. If the business plans of that year had proved successful, it is very possible that Irving might for the rest of his life have remained absorbed in

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11 "He was a great favorite among all the children of the village." (From a drawing by F. O. C. Darley.)

commercial undertakings. The firm was, however, in 1816, overtaken by disaster, and the young lawyer-merchant found himself adrift in England with very little money and with no assured occupation or prospects.

Irving came speedily, however, into friendly relations with a number of the leading authors of the day, a group which included Scott, Moore, and Southey. Scott had, in fact, sought him out very promptly, having been fascinated some years earlier by the originality of the humor shown in Knickerbocker's *New York*. He wrote at the time to Murray: "We have been devoting some pleasant hours to that most excellently jocose history of New York. . . . Our sides are actually sore with laughing."

After a couple of years of rather desultory travelling and scribbling, Irving completed the series of papers which was published in 1818 under the title of *The Sketch-Book*. It is probably by this volume that he is still today best known among readers on both sides of the Atlantic. The book has been translated into almost every European tongue, and it served for many years, and possibly still serves, in France and in Germany as a model of English style, and as a text-book from which students are taught their English. In this latter *rôle* it replaced the *Spectator* of

Addison. If the style of some of our older German friends strikes us to-day as somewhat stilted and antiquated, it may be considered as due to the fact of their having in their early youth taken in their English through Addison.

The Sketch-Book was about ready for the press when Irving received from the Secretary of the Navy an offer of the position of chief clerk of the Navy Department, with a salary (large for that time) of $2400. In those earlier days of the Republic positions of this kind were held under tenure of good behavior, and such an appointment would therefore have meant for Irving a competency free from care, upon which he could depend for a number of years.

Absorbed as he was, however, at this time in literary plans, he was not willing to bind himself with the trammels of office, and the offer was declined. It is possible that in the course of the next few months the young writer rather regretted his decision, as *The Sketch-Book* was refused by Murray and by other of the leading publishers, and he found himself discouraged as to the prospects of securing for it a hearing. He finally, however, risked the publication of a small edition on his own account, and the work won for itself so immediate a reputation that, a year later, Murray was very glad to reconsider his

former conclusion and took charge of the book under a satisfactory arrangement.

The publication by Murray of *The Sketch-Book*, and, two years later, of *Bracebridge Hall* brought Irving at once into repute with the most attractive literary circles in Great Britain. His publisher was Murray the second, who had on his list the works of Byron, Southey, Coleridge, Disraeli the elder, and other of the leading writers of the time, and whose imprint was accepted as stamping a book with literary importance.

After a year or two spent in travelling on the Continent, Irving was appointed *attaché* to the legation at Madrid, where he took up his residence in 1826. The appointment came to him from Alexander Everett, at that time Minister of State, who was an old friend and who had a cordial interest in Irving's literary undertakings.

In sending him the appointment Everett took pains at once to place before him a literary suggestion. He proposed that Irving should make a translation of the history that Señor Navarrete, of the Madrid Historical Society, had at that time in preparation of the voyages of Columbus. After due consideration Irving decided against the plan for the translation, on the ground that Navarrete had prepared a mass of records rather than a

biography. Irving came, however, into pleasant personal relations with the historian, who placed his materials freely at the disposition of the young American; and with these materials Irving began at once the preparation of the biography. He devoted to this the year 1826 and brought it to completion in the spring of 1827. It may be of interest to the present reader of Irving's *Columbus* to note the following extract from a German historian with whom Irving appears not to have been acquainted. Oscar Peschel states, in his *History of the Age of Discoveries* (Stuttgart, 1848), that "Columbus brooded over the prophetic song of the chorus in the *Medea* of Seneca":

> "Venient annis sæcula seris
> Quibus Oceanus vincula serum
> Laxet, et ingens pateat tellus,
> Tethysque novos delegat orbes,
> Nec sit terris ultima Thule."

(Distant the age, but surely it will come,
When Ocean shall relax the bonds of men
And to them open all the great wide earth.
Then Tethys will reveal worlds now unknown,
And no far Thule can be called "the last.")

In the summer of 1827 the *Life of Columbus* was accepted by Murray, who writes concerning it: "It is beautiful. By far the best thing Irving has ever done." Murray paid for the English rights £3000. This first London

edition was published in four octavo volumes. The arrangement for the American edition was made with Carvell & Co. of New York. At about the same time Carey, Lea & Blanchard of Philadelphia secured from Irving the right to publish for a term of seven years his four preceding works, paying him for the privilege $600 per annum.

The *Columbus* met with very cordial appreciation on both sides of the Atlantic. Southey writes from London, "This work places Irving at the front of modern biographers." Edward Everett says that "through the *Columbus* Irving has secured the position of founder of the American school of polite learning."

The *Columbus* was completed, but Irving still found himself fascinated with the examination of the Spanish chronicles. He made long sojourns in Granada, living within the precincts of the Alhambra Palace, and later he took up his residence for a number of months in Seville. It was at this time that he prepared the collection of *Legends of the Alhambra*, and in the year following he completed his *Conquest of Granada*.

It was in the latter part of 1828 that Irving declined an offer of one hundred guineas to write an article for the *British Quarterly Review* (of which his friend Murray was the publisher), on the ground, as he wrote, that "the

The Cladera Portrait of Christopher Columbus.

Review has been so persistently hostile to our country that I cannot draw a pen in its service." This episode may count as a fair rejoinder to certain of the home critics who were then accusing Irving (as, half a century later, Lowell was in like manner accused) of having become so much absorbed in his English sympathies as to have lost touch with the patriotism of his native land.

In the same year Irving declined a further suggestion from Murray to take charge as editor, at a salary of £1000 a year, of a monthly magazine that Murray had in plan. It may be mentioned that the plan was put to one side and did not take shape until seventy-one years later, when John Murray the fourth (the grandson of Irving's Murray) established the *Monthly Review*.

In 1829 Irving was made a member of the Royal Academy of History in Madrid. The recognition that came to him from Spain was only in the form of honours of this kind. Spanish editions of his books had been produced and were in active demand, but for these editions the author received no compensation. Irving was still in Spain at the time of the election to the presidency of General Jackson. He writes to one of his brothers just before the inauguration: "As to the old General, with all his 'hickory' characteristics,

"He used to tell his story to every stranger that arrived at Mr. Doolittle's hotel."

(Half-tone reproduction of photogravure in "Rip Van Winkle.")

I judge he has good stuff in him and will make a sagacious, independent, high-spirited President. I doubt his proving as high-handed as many are anticipating."

In July, 1829, Louis McLane, Minister to the Court of St. James, appointed Irving Secretary of Legation, and he again took up his residence in London. In 1830 the Royal Society of Literature of England voted him, as a recognition of his service to history and to literature, one of its ten-guinea gold medals. The recognition was said to have been given more particularly on the ground of the repute secured for the *Life of Columbus*. The other medal of that year was given to Hallam for his *History of the Middle Ages*.

In 1831 Irving was made an LL.D. of Oxford. The ceremony of the installation was a serious experience for a man of his shy and retiring habits. As he sat in the Senate Hall the students saluted him with cries of "Here comes old Knickerbocker!" "How about Ichabod Crane?" "Has Rip Van Winkle waked up yet?" and, "Who discovered Columbus?"

In September, 1831, Irving dined with Scott. It was their last meeting. The great novelist was already seriously broken down, having exhausted himself in the gigantic efforts made during the previous five years to

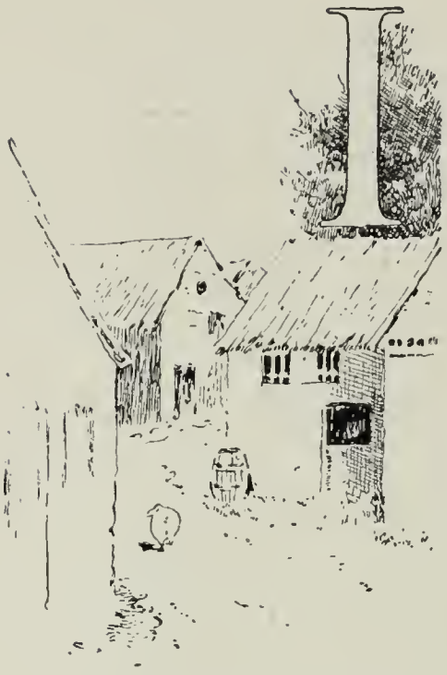
earn with his pen sufficient to pay off the indebtedness incurred through his partnership with the Ballantynes and through the advances made by Constable. During Irving's sojourn in London, William Cullen Bryant bespoke his friendly service in securing publication in England for his first volume of poems. The book was declined by Murray, but Irving finally arranged to get it published by Andrews, the latter making it a condition that the volume should bear Irving's name as editor. The London publisher found himself troubled by the following lines in the poem on *Marion:*

"The British foeman trembles
When Marion's name is heard."

Andrews feared that these lines would provoke antagonism, and Irving, desiring to avoid anything that might stand in the way of the success of the volume, took the responsibility of changing the verse, so that it read:

"The foeman trembles in his camp
When Marion's name is heard."

Irving's action was sharply criticised by William Leggett (then editor of the *New York Evening Post*) and others, and Bryant himself felt that a liberty had been taken. Later, however, he wrote with appreciation of the friendly care shown by his representative.



IN 1832, Irving returned to New York, having been absent from the country for seventeen years. His fellow-citizens welcomed him with a banquet given in the City Hotel, somewhat to Irving's discomfiture, as he had a great dread of public functions of any kind, and was especially nervous in any attempt at public speaking. The orator of the evening, John Duer, a well-known lawyer, addressed him as "the Dutch Herodotus."

Later in the same year Irving made a journey through the territory of the Southwest, an account of which he afterwards printed under the title of *A Tour on the Prairies* (this paper is contained in the volume *Crayon Miscellany*). Irving's description of St. Louis as a frontier post, and of the great wilderness extending to the west of the Mississippi, makes to-day interesting reading. Returning from this journey by way of New Orleans, he visited Columbia, S. C., where he was the guest of Governor Hamilton. The Governor had just transmitted in a message to the legislature the edict of nullification. The Governor insisted that Irving must certainly repeat his

"Sunnyside," the home of Washington Irving.

visit to the State. "Certainly," responded the guest; "I will come with the first troops."

In 1836 Irving declined the Democratic nomination for Congress, and in the following year he declined the Tammany nomination for Mayor of New York and President Van Buren's offer of the Secretaryship of the Navy.

During these years he was building the little Dutch cottage on the Hudson (south of Tarrytown), to which he gave the name of Wolfert's Roost, and was absorbing himself in the life of a country gentleman. He writes to his friend Halleck, "You must contrive to come up at once to see my new pig. He is a darling."

In 1840 Irving completed his *Life of Goldsmith*, a subject which he has treated with the keenest personal sympathy. In 1842 Irving accepted from President Tyler the appointment of Minister to Spain. The suggestion for Tyler's selection came from Daniel Webster, at that time Secretary of State. Irving's third sojourn in Spain was for him exceedingly attractive. He continued his researches in Spanish literature and legends, and was accepted by the men of letters of Spain as one of themselves. Some of the results of these later studies were afterwards given to the public in the attractive volumes called *Spanish Papers*.

25 **The Old Dutch Church, Sleepy Hollow.**

(From a drawing by W. J. Wilson.)

In returning to New York in 1847 Irving was met with a serious disappointment. His books were out of print, at least in the United States, and his publishers, Carey, Lea & Blanchard of Philadelphia, assured him that there was for them no longer any public demand, and that it would be an unprofitable venture to undertake to put upon the market new editions. They pointed out to him that the public taste had changed, and that a new style of authorship was now in vogue. The books had, in fact, been out of print since 1845, but at that time Irving, being still in Spain, had concluded that the arrangements for revised editions might wait for his return. To be told now by experienced publishers, who believed themselves to be fully informed as to the taste of the American public, that *The Sketch-Book*, *The Legends of the Alhambra*, *Bracebridge Hall*, *Knickerbocker's New York*, and *The Life of Columbus*, notwithstanding their original prestige, had had their day and were not wanted by the new generation, was a serious shock to Irving, not only on the ground of the blow to his confidence in himself as an author, but because his savings were inconsiderable and he needed the continued income that he had hoped to secure from his pen.

His personal wants were few, but he had

always used generously among his large circle of relatives such resources as he possessed, and, having neither wife nor child, he had made a home at Sunnyside for an aged brother and two nieces.

Some Western land investments (which in later years became profitable) were at this time liabilities instead of resources, and his immediate financial prospects seemed to be discouraging enough.

He had a desk in the office of his brother, John Treat Irving, with whom he had previously studied, and to him he now spoke, probably half jestingly, of the necessity of resuming the practice of law. He was at this time sixty-five years of age, and as it was nearly forty years since he had touched a law-book it is hardly likely that he could have made himself of much value as a counsellor. One morning early in 1848, Irving came into his brother's office in a joyful frame of mind. He tossed a letter over to his brother, saying: "John, here is a fool of a publisher willing to give me $1000 a year to go on scribbling." The "fool of a publisher" was the late Geo. P. Putnam, who had recently returned from London, where he had for eight years been engaged in inducing the English public to buy American books, an experiment, by the way, in which his sons, half a century later, are still

interesting themselves. In the intervals of his London business, Mr. Putnam had found time to write and to publish a useful little

George Palmer Putnam.

volume called *American Facts*, which had been planned to correct the long series of British misconceptions and misrepresentations concerning men and things on this side of the Atlantic.

Mr. Putnam now purposed to issue a uniform revised edition of all of Irving's existing writings, with which should be associated such books as he might later complete; and to pay to the author a royalty on each copy

Washington Irving.

sold, guaranteeing against such royalty for the first year the sum of $1000; for the second, $1500; and for each of the three years succeeding, $2000.

It may be mentioned as an evidence of the accuracy of the publisher's judgment that the

payments during the years in which this guarantee continued were always in excess of the amounts contracted for.

In 1849, the London publisher, Bohn, began to print unauthorized editions of the various books of Mr. Irving, for the authority to publish the authorized editions of which Mr. Murray and Mr. Bentley had made liberal payments. A series of litigations ensued, as a result of which Murray and Bentley, discouraged with the long fight and with the great law expense incurred in securing protection under the existing copyright law, accepted the offer of the "pirate" for the purchase, at a merely nominal price, of their "rights," and Irving's works came to be included in the Bohn Standard Library Series.

British copyright was, in 1850, in a very unsatisfactory condition, and it was not easy to ascertain from its provisions just what rights "alien authors" could maintain. So far as American authors were concerned, this uncertainty continued until the completion of the international copyright arrangement of 1891.

As one result of the transfer to Bohn of Irving's English editions, he found that he could no longer depend upon any material English receipts for his later works. For the "right" to publish the English edition of *The*

The Ascension of Mahomet.

From D'Ohsson's *Tableau Général de l' Empire Othoman.*

Life of Washington Bohn paid the sum of £50, which was for the author a sad reduction from the £3000 that Murray had given him for the *Columbus*.

In December, 1852, Irving wrote to his publisher, Mr. Putnam, a letter which, as expressing both the sense of fairness and the modesty of nature of the man is worth quoting:

"For my own part, let me say how sensibly I appreciate the kind tone and expressions of your letter; but as to your talk of 'obligations' to me, I am conscious of none that have not been fully counterbalanced on your part, and I take pleasure in expressing the great satisfaction I have derived through all our intercourse from your amiable, obliging, and honorable conduct. Indeed, I never had dealings with any man, whether in the way of business or of friendship, more perfectly free from alloy. That those dealings have been profitable is mainly owing to your own sagacity and enterprise. You had confidence in the continued vitality of my writings. . . . You called them again into active existence and gave them a circulation that has, I believe, surprised even yourself. In rejoicing at their success, my satisfaction is doubly enhanced by the idea that you share in the benefits derived from it. Wishing you that continued prosperity in business which your

The House of Astor where Irving Wrote "Astoria."

upright, enterprising, tasteful, and liberal mode of conducting it merits and is calculated

Washington Irving.
Minister to Spain.

to ensure, and invoking on you and yours a happy New Year, I remain

"Very truly and heartily yours,

"WASHINGTON IRVING."

That these expressions of friendship were

Fall of Braddock.

(From a painting by C. Schuessele.)

not mere empty courtesy, Irving had an opportunity a few years later of making clear. In 1857, partly because of the business mismanagement of his financial partner, and partly on the ground of the general disasters of the year, Mr. Putnam was obliged to make an assignment of his business. Irving received a number of propositions from other publishers for the transfer of his books, the commercial value of which had now become fully appreciated. From some of these propositions Irving could undoubtedly have secured much more satisfactory returns than were coming to him under the existing arrangement. He declined them all, however, writing to Mr. Putnam to the effect that, so long as a Putnam remained in the publishing business, he purposed to retain for his books the Putnam imprint.

He arranged with the assignee to purchase from the estate the plates and the publication agreements for his books. He held these plates for some years, until Mr. Putnam was again in a position to control them, and then restored them to his publisher, resuming the old publishing arrangement and waiving the larger proceeds to which, as the owner of the plates, he would have continued to be entitled. Such an episode is an interesting one in the long history of the relations of authors

The Old Dutch Church of Sleepy Hollow.

(Celebrated by Irving in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.*)

with publishers, and it may be considered as equally creditable to both parties.

Irving found himself not a little perplexed with one of his publisher's presents. Mr. Putnam had always protested against the method or lack of method with which the author would pile up on one modest writing-table his mass of MSS., notes, reference books, etc.; and took occasion to send him a properly arranged desk, asking only in return that he might have the old table. Irving wrote to his publisher, trying to be grateful for the attention, but admitting that since he had placed his papers in the several pigeon-holes where they were supposed to belong, he had never been able to find anything.

The final and, in some respects, the greatest of Irving's literary productions, the *Life of Washington*, was completed on his seventy-sixth birthday, April 3, 1859; and a month or two later he had the pleasure of seeing the printed volume. His death came on a quiet day in November of the same year.

George William Curtis, a man whose sweetness and refinement of nature as well as the special tone of his literary quality brought him into keen sympathy with the author of *The Sketch-Book*, wrote after Irving's death as follows: "With Irving the man and the author were one. The same twinkling humor,

untouched by personal venom, the same sweetness, geniality, and grace . . . which endeared the writer to his readers, endeared

Irving's Resting-Place.

the man to his friends. Gifted with a happy temperament, with that cheerful balance of thought and feeling which begets the sympathy that prevents bitter animosity, he lived

through the sharpest struggles of our politics, not without interest, but without bitterness, and holding the tenderest respect of every party.

"When his death was known, there was no class of men who more sincerely deplored him than those of his own vocation. The older authors felt that a friend, not a rival—the younger, that a father—had gone. There is not a young literary aspirant in the country who, if he ever personally met Irving, did not hear from him the kindest words of sympathy, regard, and encouragement. There is none of the older rank who, knowing him, did not love him. He belonged to no clique, no party in his own profession, more than in any other of the great interests of life, and that not by any wilful independence or neutrality armed against all comers, but by the natural catholicity of his nature."

To those of the present day who have felt the charm of a personal relation with the younger writer, it would seem as if these words were describing not only Washington Irving, but George William Curtis.

This brief account of the Knickerbocker author can, I think, be appropriately concluded with the lines in which he was so happily characterized by another good American, also of kindred nature. *The Fable for Critics*

was published in 1848, when Irving was sixty-five. Lowell, then a youngster in his twenties, writes:

"What! Irving? thrice welcome, warm heart and fine brain,
You bring back the happiest spirit from Spain,
And the gravest, sweet humor that ever were there
Since Cervantes met death in his gentle despair.
Nay, don't be embarrassed, nor look so beseeching;
I sha'n't run directly against my own preaching!
And, having just laughed at their Raphaels and Dantes,
Go to setting you up beside matchless Cervantes.
But allow me to speak what I honestly feel:
To a true poet-heart add the fun of Dick Steele,
Throw in all of Addison, minus the chill,
With the whole of that partnership's stock and good will,
Mix well, and while stirring, hum o'er, as a spell,
The 'Fine Old English Gentleman,' simmer it well,
Sweeten just to your own private liking, then strain,
That only the finest and clearest remain,
Let it stand out of doors till a soul it receives
From the warm, lazy sun loitering down through green leaves,
When you 'll find a choice nature, not wholly deserving
A name either English or Yankee—just Irving."

G. H. P.

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